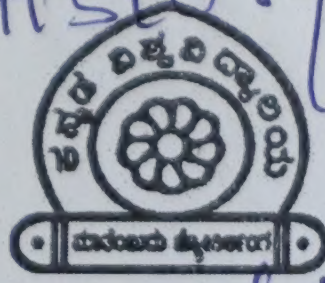


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Dr. A. Trachtenberg

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HISTORY OF MAY DAY

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HISTORY OF MAY DAY

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ALEXANDER TRACHTENBERG

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HISTORY OF MAY DAY

THE ORIGIN OF MAY DAY is indissolubly bound up with the struggle for the shorter workday—a demand of major political significance for the working class. This struggle is manifest almost from the beginning of the factory system in the United States.

Although the demand for higher wages appears to be the most prevalent cause for the early strikes in this country, the question of shorter hours and the right to organize were always kept in the foreground when workers formulated their demands. As exploitation was becoming intensified and workers were feeling more and more the strain of inhumanly long working hours, the demand for an appreciable reduction of hours became more pronounced.

Already at the opening of the 19th century, workers in the United States made known their grievances against working from “sunrise to sunset,” the then prevailing workday. Fourteen, sixteen and even eighteen hours a day were not uncommon. During the conspiracy trial against the leaders of striking Philadelphia cordwainers in 1806, it was brought out that workers were employed as long as nineteen and twenty hours a day.

The twenties and thirties are replete with strikes for reduction of hours of work and definite demands for a 10-hour day were put forward in many industrial centers. The organization of what is considered as the first trade union in the world, the Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia, preceding by two years the one formed by workers in England, can be definitely ascribed to a strike of building trade workers

in Philadelphia in 1827 for the 10-hour day. During the bakers' strike in New York in 1834 the *Workingmen's Advocate* reported that "journeymen employed in the loaf bread business have for years been suffering worse than Egyptian bondage. They have had to labor on an average of eighteen to twenty hours out of the twenty-four."

The demand in those localities for a 10-hour day soon grew into a movement, which, although impeded by the crisis of 1837, led the federal government under President Van Buren to decree the 10-hour day for all those employed on government work. The struggle for the universality of the 10-hour day, however, continued during the next decades. No sooner had this demand been secured in a number of industries than the workers began to raise the slogan for an 8-hour day. The feverish activity in organizing labor unions during the fifties gave this new demand an impetus which, however, was checked by the crisis of 1857. The demand was, however, won in a few well-organized trades before the crisis. That the movement for a shorter workday was not only peculiar to the United States, but was prevalent wherever workers were exploited under the rising capitalist system, can be seen from the fact that even in far away Australia the building trade workers raised the slogan "8 hours work, 8 hours recreation and 8 hours rest" and were successful in securing this demand in 1856.

EIGHT-HOUR MOVEMENT STARTED IN AMERICA

The struggles which directly gave birth to May Day, were initiated in the United States in 1884 in the movement for the 8-hour day. However, a gene-

ration before, a national labor organization, the National Labor Union, which at first gave great promise of developing into a militant organizing center of the American working class, took up the question of a shorter workday and proposed to organize a broad movement in its behalf. The first years of the Civil War, 1861-1862, saw the disappearance of the few national trade unions which had been formed just before the war began, especially the Molders' Union and the Machinists' and Blacksmiths' Union. The years immediately following, however, witnessed the unification on a national scale of a number of local labor organizations, and the urge for a national federation of all these unions became apparent. On August 20, 1866, there gathered in Baltimore delegates from three scores of trade unions who formed the National Labor Union. The movement for the national organization was led by William H. Sylvis, the leader of the reconstructed Molders' Union, who, although a young man, was the outstanding figure in the labor movement of those years. Sylvis was in correspondence with the leaders of the First International in London and helped to influence the National Labor Union to establish relations with the General Council of the International.

It was at the founding convention of the National Labor Union in 1866 that the following resolution was passed :

"The first and great necessity of the present, to free labor of this country from capitalist slavery, is the passing of a law by which 8 hours shall be the normal working day in all states in the American union. We are resolved to put forth all our strength until this glorious result is attained."

The same convention voted for independent political action in connection with the securing of the legal

enactment of the 8-hour day and the "election of men pledged to sustain and represent the interests of the industrial classes."

Eight-hour leagues were formed as a result of the agitation of the National Labor Union; and through the political activity which the organization developed, several state governments adopted the 8-hour day on public work and the U.S. Congress enacted a similar law in 1868. The inspired leader of the 8-hour movement was the Boston machinist, Ira Steward.

The program and policies of the early labor movement, although primitive and not always sound, were based, nevertheless, on healthy proletarian instinct and could have served as starting points for the development of a militant labor movement in this country were it not for the role played by reformist misleaders and capitalist politicians who later infested the labor organizations and directed them in wrong channels. Thus, four generations back, the national organization of American labor, the N.L.U., expressed itself against "capitalist slavery" and for independent political action.

Sylvis continued to keep in touch with the International in London. Due to his influence as president of the organization, the National Labor Union voted at its convention in 1867 to co-operate with the international working class movement and in 1869 it voted to accept the invitation of the General Council and send a delegate to the Basle Congress of the International. Unfortunately, Sylvis died just before the N.L.U. convention, and A.C. Cameron, the editor of the *Workingmen's Advocate*, published in Chicago, was sent as delegate in his stead. In a special resolution the General Council mourned the death of this promising young American labor leader. "The eyes of all were turned upon Sylvis, who, as a general of the

proletarian army, had an experience of ten years, outside of his great abilities—and Sylvis is dead.” The passing of Sylvis was one of the contributing causes of the decay which soon set in and led to the disappearance of the National Labor Union.

MARX ON THE EIGHT-HOUR MOVEMENT

The decision for the 8-hour day was made by the National Labor Union in August, 1866. In September of the same year the Geneva Congress of the First International went on record for the same demand in the following words:

“The legal limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvements and emancipation of the working class must prove abortive.... The Congress proposes 8 hours as the legal limit of the working day.”

In the chapter on “The Working Day” in the first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867, Marx calls attention to the inauguration of the 8-hour movement by the National Labor Union. In the passage, famous especially because it contains Marx’s telling reference to the solidarity of class interests between the Negro and white workers, he wrote:

“In the United States of America, any sort of independent labor movement was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labor with a white skin cannot emancipate itself where labor with a black skin is branded. But out of the death of slavery a new vigorous life sprang. The first fruit of the Civil War was an agitation for the 8-hour day—a movement which ran with express speed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.”

Marx calls attention to how almost simultaneously, in fact within two weeks of each other, a workers' convention meeting in Baltimore voted for the 8-hour day, and an international congress meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, adopted a similar decision. "Thus on both sides of the Atlantic did the working class movement, spontaneous outgrowth of the conditions of production," endorse the same movement of the limitation of hours of labor and concretize it in the demand for the 8-hour day.

That the decision of the Geneva Congress was co-ordinated with the American decision can be seen from the following portion of the resolution: "As this limitation represents the general demand of the workers of the North-American United States, the Congress transforms this demand into the general platform of the workers of the whole world."

A similar influence of the American labor movement upon an international congress and in behalf of the same cause was exerted more profoundly 23 years later.

MAY DAY BORN IN THE UNITED STATES

The First International ceased to exist as an international organization in 1872, when its headquarters were removed from London to New York, although it was not officially disbanded till 1876. It was at the first congress of the reconstituted International, later known as the Second International, held at Paris in 1889, that May First was set aside as a day upon which the workers of the world, organized in their political parties and trade unions, were to fight for the important political demand: the 8-hour day. The Paris decision was influenced by a decision made at

Chicago five years earlier by delegates of a young American labor organization—the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, later known under the abbreviated name, American Federation of Labor. At the Fourth Convention of this organization, October 7, 1884, the following resolution was passed:

“Resolved by the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, that eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s labor from May First, 1886, and that we recommend to labor organizations throughout their jurisdiction that they so direct their laws as to conform to this resolution by the time named.”

Although nothing was said in the resolution about the methods by which the Federation expected to establish the 8-hour day, it is self-evident that an organization which at that time commanded an adherence of not more than 50,000 members could not declare “that eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s work” without putting up a fight for it in the shops, mills, and mines where its members were employed, and without attempting to draw into the struggle for the 8-hour day still larger numbers of workers. The provision in the resolution that the unions affiliated to the Federation “so direct their laws as to conform to this resolution” referred to the matter of paying strike benefits to their members who were expected to strike on May First, 1886, for the 8-hour day, and would probably have to stay out long enough to need assistance from the union. As this strike action was to be national in scope and involve all the affiliated organizations, the unions, according to their by-laws, had to secure the endorsement of the strike by their members, particularly since that would involve the expenditure of funds, etc. It must be remembered that

the Federation, just as the A.F. of L. today, was organized on a voluntary, federation basis, and decisions of a national convention could be binding upon affiliated unions only if those unions endorsed these decisions.

PREPARATIONS FOR MAY DAY STRIKE

The great strike struggles of 1877, in which tens of thousands of railroad and steel workers militantly fought against the corporations and the government which sent troops to suppress the strikes, left an impress on the whole labor movement. It was the first great mass action of the American working class on a national scale and, although they were defeated by the combined forces of the State and capital, the American workers emerged from these struggles with a clearer understanding of their class position in society, a greater militancy and a heightened morale. It was in part an answer to the coal barons of Pennsylvania who, in their attempt to destroy the miners' organization in the anthracite region, railroaded ten militant miners (Molly Maguires) to the gallows in 1875.

Although the decade 1880-1890 was generally one of the most active in the development of American industry and the extension of the home market, the year 1884-1885 experienced a depression which was a cyclical depression following the crisis of 1873. The movement for a shorter workday received added impetus from the unemployment and the great suffering which prevailed during that period.

The Federation, just organized, saw the possibility of utilizing the slogan of the 8-hour day as a rallying organization slogan among the great masses of workers who were outside of the Federation and the

Knights of Labor, an older and then still growing organization. The Federation appealed to the Knights of Labor for support in the movement for the 8-hour day, realizing that only a general action involving all organized labor, could make possible favorable results.

At the convention of the Federation in 1885, the resolution on the walk-out for May First of the following year was reiterated and several national unions took action to prepare for the struggle, among them particularly the Carpenters and Cigar Makers. The agitation for the May First action for the 8-hour day showed immediate results in the growth of membership of the existing unions. The Knights of Labor grew by leaps and bounds, reaching the apex of its growth in 1886. It is reported that the K. of L., which was better known than the Federation and was considered a fighting organization, increased its membership from 200,000 to nearly 700,000 during that period. The Federation, first to inaugurate the movement and definitely to set a date for the strike for the 8-hour day, also grew in numbers and particularly in prestige among the broad masses of the workers. As the day of the strike was approaching and it was becoming evident that the leadership of the K. of L., especially Terence Powderly, was sabotaging the movement and even secretly advising its unions not to strike, the popularity of the Federation was still more enhanced. The rank and file of both organizations were enthusiastically preparing for the struggle. Eight-hour day leagues and associations sprang up in various cities and an elevated spirit of militancy was felt throughout the labor movement, which was infecting masses of unorganized workers. A new day was dawning for the American working class.

The best way to learn the mood of the workers is

to study the extent and seriousness of their struggles. The number of strikes during a given period is a good indicator of the fighting mood of the workers. The number of strikes during 1885 and 1886 as compared with previous years shows what a spirit of militancy was animating the labor movement. Not only were the workers preparing for action on May First, 1886, but in 1885 the number of strikes already showed an appreciable increase. During the years 1881-1884 the number of strikes and lockouts averaged less than 500, and on the average involved only about 150,000 workers a year. The strikes and lockouts in 1885 increased to about 700 and the number of workers involved jumped to 250,000. In 1886 the number of strikes more than doubled over 1885, attaining as many as 1,572, with a proportional increase in the number of workers affected, now 600,000. How widespread the strike movement became in 1886 can be seen from the fact that while in 1885 there were only 2,467 establishments affected by strikes, the number involved in the following year had increased to 11,562. In spite of open sabotage by the leadership of the K. of L., it was estimated that over 500,000 workers were directly involved in strikes for the 8-hour day.

The strike center was Chicago, where the strike movement was most widespread, but many other cities were involved in the struggle on May First. New York, Baltimore, Washington, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and many other cities made a good showing in the walkout. The characteristic feature of the strike movement was that the unskilled and unorganized workers were drawn into the struggle, and that sympathetic strikes were quite prevalent during that period. A rebellious spirit was abroad in the land, and bourgeois historians speak of the "social war" and "hatred for capital" which was

manifested during these strikes, and of the enthusiasm of the rank and file which pervaded the movement. It is estimated that about half of the number of workers who struck on May First were successful, and where they did not secure the 8-hour day, they succeeded in appreciably reducing the hours of labor.

THE CHICAGO STRIKE AND HAYMARKET

The May First strike was most aggressive in Chicago, which was at that time the center of a militant Left-wing labor movement. Although insufficiently clear politically on a number of the problems of the labor movement, it was nevertheless a fighting movement, always ready to call the workers to action, develop their fighting spirit in the struggle for the immediate improvement of their living and working conditions.

With the aid of the militant labor groups the strike in Chicago assumed the largest proportions. An 8-hour Association was formed long in advance of the strike to prepare for it. The Central Labor Union, composed of the Left-wing labor unions, gave full support to the 8-hour Association, which was a united front organization, including the unions affiliated to the Federation, the K. of L., and the Socialist Labor Party, the first organized socialist political party of the American working class. On the Sunday before May First the Central Labor Union organized a mobilization demonstration which was attended by 25,000 workers.

On May First, Chicago witnessed a great outpouring of workers, who laid down tools at the call of the organized labor movement of the city. It was the most effective demonstration of class solidarity yet experienced by the labor movement itself. The

importance at that time of the demand—the 8-hour day—and the extent and character of the strike gave the movement significant political meaning. This significance was deepened by the developments of the next few days. The 8-hour movement, culminating in the strike on May First, 1886, forms by itself a glorious chapter in the fighting history of the American working class.

The enemies of the workers did not remain idle. The march of the Chicago workers was arrested by the then superior combined force of the employers and the city government, determined to destroy the militant leaders, hoping thereby to deal a deadly blow to the entire labor movement of Chicago. The events of May 3 and 4, which led to what is known as the Haymarket Affair, were a direct outgrowth of the May First strike. The demonstration held on May 4 at Haymarket Square was called to protest against the brutal attack of the police upon a meeting of striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Works on May 3, where six workers were killed and many wounded. The meeting was peaceful and about to be adjourned when the police again launched an attack upon the assembled workers. A bomb was thrown into the crowd, killing a sergeant. A battle ensued with the result that seven policemen and four workers were dead. The blood bath at Haymarket Square, the railroading to the gallows of Parsons, Spies, Fischer, and Engel, and the imprisonment of the other militant Chicago leaders, was the answer of the Chicago employers. It was the signal for action to the bosses all over the country. The second half of 1886 was marked by a concentrated offensive of the employers, determined to regain the position lost during the strike movement of 1885-1886.

One year after the hanging of the Chicago labor

leaders, the Federation, now known as the American Federation of Labor, at its convention in St. Louis in 1888, voted to rejuvenate the movement for the 8-hour day. May First, which was already a tradition, having served two years before as the concentration point of the powerful movement of the workers based upon a political class issue, was again chosen as the day upon which to re-inaugurate the struggle for the 8-hour day. May First, 1890, was to witness a nation-wide strike for the shorter workday. At the convention in 1889, the leaders of the A.F. of L., headed by Samuel Gompers, succeeded in limiting the strike movement. It was decided that the Carpenters' Union, which was considered best prepared for the strike, should lead off with the strike, and if it proved successful, other unions were to fall in line.

MAY DAY BECOMES INTERNATIONAL

In his autobiography Gompers tells how the A.F. of L. contributed to making May Day an international labor holiday: "As plans for the 8-hour movement developed, we were constantly realizing how we could widen our purpose. As the time of the meeting of the International Workingmen's Congress in Paris approached, it occurred to me that we could aid our movement by an expression of world-wide sympathy from that congress." Gompers, who had already exhibited all the attributes of reformism and opportunism which later came to full bloom in his class collaborationist policy, was ready to get the support of a movement among the socialist workers, the influence of which he strongly combated.

On July 14, 1889, the hundredth anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, there assembled in Paris, leaders

from organized socialist movements of many lands, to form once more an international organization of workers, patterned after the one formed 25 years earlier by their great teachers, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Those assembled at the foundation meeting of what was to become the Second International heard from the American delegates about the struggle in America for the 8-hour day during 1884-1886, and the recent rejuvenation of the movement. Inspired by the example of the American workers, the Paris Congress adopted the following resolution:

“The Congress decides to organize a great international demonstration, so that in all countries and in all cities on one appointed day the toiling masses shall demand of the state authorities the legal reduction of the working day to eight hours, as well as the carrying out of other decisions of the Paris Congress. Since a similar demonstration has already been decided upon for May 1, 1890, by the American Federation of Labor at its Convention in St. Louis, December, 1888, this day is accepted for the international demonstration. The workers of the various countries must organize this demonstration according to conditions prevailing in each country.”

May Day, 1890, was celebrated in many European countries, and in the United States the Carpenters' Union, under the leadership of the Socialist Peter McGuire, and other building trades entered into a general strike for the 8-hour day. Despite the Exceptional Laws against the Socialists, workers in the various German industrial cities celebrated May Day. Similarly in other European capitals demonstrations were held, although the authorities warned against them and tried to suppress them. In the United States, the Chicago and New York demonstrations were of particularly great significance. Many thousands para-

ded the streets in support of the 8-hour day demand ; and the demonstrations closed with great open air meetings at central points.

At the next Congress, in Brussels, 1891, the International reiterated the original purpose of May First, to demand the 8-hour day, but added that it must serve also as a demonstration in behalf of the demands to improve working conditions, and to insure peace among the nations. The revised resolution particularly stressed the importance of the "class character of the May First demonstrations" for the 8-hour day and the other demands which would lead to the "deepening of the class struggle." The resolution also demanded that work be stopped "wherever possible." Although the reference to strikes on May First was only conditional, the International began to enlarge upon and concretize the purposes of the demonstrations. The British Laborites showed their opportunism by refusing to accept even the conditional proposal for a strike on May First, and together with the German Social-Democrats voted to postpone the May Day demonstration to the Sunday following May First.

ENGELS ON INTERNATIONAL MAY DAY

In his preface to the fourth German edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, which he wrote on May 1, 1890, Engels, reviewing the history of the international proletarian organizations, calls attention to the significance of the first International May Day :

"As I write these lines, the proletariat of Europe and America is holding a review of its forces ; it is mobilized for the first time as One army, under One flag, and fighting One immediate aim : an eight-hour working day, established by legal enactment....

The spectacle we are now witnessing will make the capitalists and landowners of all lands realize that today the proletarians of all lands are, in very truth, united. If only Marx were with me to see it with his own eyes !”

The significance of simultaneous international proletarian demonstration was appealing more and more to the imagination and revolutionary instincts of the workers throughout the world, and every year witnessed greater masses participating in the demonstrations.

The response of the workers showed itself in the following addition to the May First resolution adopted at the 1893 Congress of the International at Zurich at which Engels was present.

“The demonstration on May First for the 8-hour day must serve at the same time as a demonstration of the determined will of the working class to destroy class distinctions through social change and thus enter on the road, the only road leading to peace for all peoples, to international peace.”

The reformist leaders of the various parties tried to devitalize the May First demonstrations by turning them into days of rest and recreation instead of days of struggle. This is why they always insisted on organizing the demonstrations on the Sunday nearest May First. On Sundays workers would not have to strike to stop work ; they were not working anyway. To the reformist leaders May Day was only an international labor holiday, a day of pageants and games in the parks of outlying country. That the resolution of the Zurich Congress demanded that May Day should be a “demonstration of the determined will of the working class to destroy class distinctions,” i.e., the demonstration of the will to fight for the abolition of the capitalist system of exploitation and wage slavery, did

not trouble the reformists, since they did not consider themselves bound by the decisions of international congresses. International Socialist Congresses were to them but meetings for international friendship and good-will, like many other congresses that used to gather from time to time in various European capitals before the war. They did everything to discourage and thwart joint international action of the proletariat, and decisions of international congresses which did not conform with their ideas remained mere paper resolutions. Twenty years later the "socialism" and "internationalism" of these reformist leaders stood exposed in all their nakedness. In 1914 the International lay shattered because from its very birth it carried within it the seeds of its own destruction—the reformist misleaders of the working class.

At the International Congress at Paris in 1900 the May Day resolution of the previous Congresses was again adopted, and was strengthened by the statement that stoppage of work on May First would make the demonstration more effective. More and more, May Day demonstrations were becoming demonstrations of power. Numbers of workers participating in the demonstrations and stopping work on that day were growing. May Day became Red Day, which ruling reactionary circles in all lands looked at with foreboding when each May Day came around.

LENIN ON MAY DAY

Early in his activity in the Russian revolutionary movement Lenin contributed to making May Day known to the Russian workers as a day of demonstration and struggle. While in prison, in 1896, Lenin wrote a May Day leaflet for the St. Petersburg Union

of Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class, one of the first Marxist political groups in Russia. The leaflet was smuggled out of prison and 2,000 mimeographed copies distributed among workers in 40 factories. It was very short and written in Lenin's characteristically simple and direct style, so that the least developed among the workers could understand it. "When a month later the famous textile strikes of 1896 broke out, workers were telling us that the first impetus was given by the little modest May Day leaflet," wrote a contemporary who helped to issue it.

After telling the workers how they are exploited for the benefit of the owners of the factories in which they work, and how the government persecutes those who demand improvement in their conditions, Lenin proceeds to write about the significance of May Day.

"In France, England, Germany and other countries where workers have already been united in powerful unions and have won for themselves many rights, they organized on April 19 (May 1) [the Russian calendar was then 13 days behind the West-European] a general holiday of Labor. Leaving the stifling factories they march with unfurled banners, to the strains of music, along the main streets of the cities, demonstrating to the bosses their continuously growing power. They assemble at great mass demonstrations where speeches are made recounting the victories over the bosses during the preceding year and lay plans for struggle in the future. Under the threat of strike the bosses do not dare to fine the workers for not appearing at the factories on that day. On this day the workers also remind the bosses of their main demand: 8 hours work, 8 hours rest, and 8 hours recreation. This is what the workers of other countries are demanding now."

The Russian revolutionary movement utilized May Day to great advantage. In the preface to a pamphlet, *May Days in Kharkov*, published in November, 1900, Lenin wrote:

"In another six months, the Russian workers will celebrate the first of May of the first year of the new century, and it is time we set to work to make the arrangements for organizing the celebrations in as large a number of centers as possible, and on as imposing a scale as possible, not only by the number that will take part in them, but also by their organized character, by the class-consciousness they will reveal, by the determination that will be shown to commence the irrepressible struggle, for the political liberation of the Russian people, and, consequently, for a free opportunity for the class development of the proletariat and its open struggle for Socialism."

It can be seen how important Lenin considered the May Day demonstrations, since he called attention to them six months ahead of time. To him May Day was a rallying point for "the irrepressible struggle for the political liberation of the Russian people," for "the class development of the proletariat and its open struggle for Socialism."

Speaking of how May Day celebrations "can become great political demonstrations," Lenin asked why the Kharkov May Day celebration in 1900 was "an event of outstanding importance," and answered, "the mass participation of the workers in the strike, the huge mass meetings in the streets, the unfurling of red flags, the presentation of demands indicated in leaflets and the revolutionary character of these demands—eight-hour day and political liberty."

Lenin upbraids the Kharkov party leaders for joining the demands for the 8-hour day with other minor and purely economic demands, for he does not

want the political character of May Day in any way beclouded. He writes in this preface:

"The first of these demands [8-hour day] is the general demand put forward by the proletariat in all countries. The fact that this demand was put forward indicates that the advanced workers of Kharkov realize their solidarity with the international socialist labor movement. But precisely for this reason a demand like this should not have been included among minor demands like better treatment by foremen, or a ten per cent increase in wages. The demand for an eight-hour day, however, is the demand of the whole proletariat, presented, not to individual employers, but to the government as the representative of the whole of the present-day social and political system, to the capitalist class as a whole, the owners of all the means of production."

MAY DAY POLITICAL SLOGANS

May Days became focal points for the international proletariat. To the original demand for the 8-hour day were added other significant slogans on which the workers were called upon to concentrate during their May Day strikes and demonstrations. These included: International Working Class Solidarity; Universal Suffrage; Against Imperialist War and Colonial Oppression; the Right to the Streets; Freeing of Political Prisoners; the Right to Political and Economic Organization of the Working Class.

The last time the old International spoke on the question of May Day was at the Amsterdam Congress of 1904. After reviewing the various political slogans which were employed in the demonstrations and calling attention to the fact that in some countries

these demonstrations were still taking place on Sundays instead of May First, the resolution concludes :

“The International Socialist Congress in Amsterdam calls upon all Social-Democratic Party organizations and trade unions of all countries to demonstrate energetically on May First for the legal establishment of the 8-hour day, for the class demands of the proletariat, and for universal peace. The most effective way of demonstrating on May First is by stoppage of work. The Congress therefore makes it mandatory upon the proletarian organizations of all countries to stop work on May First, wherever it is possible without injury to the workers.”

When the massacre of the strikers in the Lena goldfields in Siberia in April, 1912, placed again the question of revolutionary mass proletarian action on the order of the day in Russia, it was on May Day of that year that hundreds of thousands of Russian workers stopped work and came out into the streets to challenge tsarist reaction, holding sway since the defeat of the first Russian Revolution in 1905. Lenin wrote about this May Day :

“The great May strike of the workers all over Russia, and the street demonstrations connected with it, the revolutionary proclamations, the revolutionary speeches to the working masses, show clearly that Russia has once more entered the period of a rising revolutionary situation.”

MAY DAY DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The betrayal by the Social-Democratic leaders during the war appeared in bold relief on May Day, 1915. This was a logical outgrowth of the class peace they made with the imperialist governments in

August, 1914. The German Social-Democracy called upon the workers to remain at work; the French Socialist in a special manifesto assured the authorities that they need not fear May First. The same attitude could be found among the Socialist majorities of the other warring countries. Only the Bolsheviki of Russia and the revolutionary minorities in other countries remained true to socialism and internationalism. The voices of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht were raised against the bacchanale of social-chauvinism. Partial strikes and open skirmishes in the streets on May Day, 1916, showed that the workers in all warring countries were freeing themselves from the poisonous influence of their traitorous leaders. For Lenin, as for all revolutionists, "the collapse of opportunism (the collapse of the Second International.—A. T.) is beneficial for the labor movement" and Lenin's call for a new International, free of the betrayers, was the demand of the hour.

The Zimmerwald (1915) and the Kienthal (1916) Socialist Conference resulted in crystallizing the revolutionary internationalist parties and minorities under Lenin's slogan of turning the imperialist war into civil war. The huge demonstrations in Berlin on May Day, 1916, organized by Karl Liebknecht and his followers in the Socialist movement, bore testimony to the living forces of the working class, which were breaking through in spite of the police prohibitions and the opposition of the official leadership.

In the United States May Day was not abandoned when war was declared in 1917. The proletarian elements in the Socialist Party took seriously the anti-war resolution of the party adopted at the Emergency St. Louis Convention early in April and utilized May Day to protest against the imperialist war. The demonstration in Cleveland held on May First, 1919,

and organized by Charles E. Ruthenberg, then local secretary of the S. P. and later one of the founders and general secretary of the Communist Party, was particularly militant. Over 20,000 workers paraded the streets of Public Square and were augmented there by many thousands more. The police brutally attacked the meeting, killing one worker and fatally wounding another.

May Day, 1917, the July Days, and finally the October Days in Russia were but stages in the development of the Russian Revolution to its fulfillment. The Russian Revolution, which opened a new era in the history of mankind, gave new impetus and significance to the tradition of May Day. The triumph of proletarian power on one-sixth of the earth realized in life the aspiration voiced by the A. F. of L. leaders of the first May Day demonstration in Union Square, New York on May 1, 1890. "While struggling for the 8-hour day we will not lose sight of the ultimate aim—the abolition of the [capitalist] wage system," read the resolution presented to the striking masses on that occasion. The Russian workers had proved to be the first to achieve that aim. But by 1917, the A. F. of L. leaders had traveled far from the aims enunciated in 1890. Their primary concern was to preserve the capitalist system and to smooth the way for the advance of American imperialism. They did not want the American workers to be inspired by the historic achievements of the Russian proletariat which gave new meaning to the fighting spirit of May Day, the day on which the working class proclaimed its international solidarity and its goal of emancipation from capitalist exploitation and wage slavery.

For the May Day, 1923, edition of the weekly *Worker*, Charles E. Ruthenberg wrote: "May Day—the day which inspires fear in the hearts of the capi-

talists and hope in the workers—the workers the world over—will find the Communist movement this year stronger in the U.S. than at any time in its history....The road is clear for greater achievements, and in the United States as elsewhere in the world the future belongs to communism.”

In a weekly *Worker* of a generation before, Eugene V. Debs wrote in a May Day edition of the paper, published on April 27, 1907: “This is the first and only International Labor Day. It belongs to the working class and is dedicated to the revolution.”

To counteract the growing, militant tradition of May Day, the A. F. of L. leaders fostered the observance only of Labor Day, the first Monday in September. This day had originally been adopted on a local scale in 1885 and later was recognized by the various State governments as an antidote to the May First celebrations. Another antidote was inaugurated by the Hoover administration with the aid of the A. F. of L. leaders by proclaiming May 1 as Child Health Day. The real meaning of this sudden interest in child welfare, however, may be gleaned from the following reference to the subject in a report submitted by the Executive Council to the 1928 Convention of the A. F. of L. “The Communists still maintain May 1 as Labor Day. Hereafter May 1 will be known as Child Health Day, as the President is directed by the resolution passed by Congress to issue a proclamation calling upon the people of the United States to observe May 1 as Child Health Day. The object is to create sentiment for year-round protection of the health of children. It is a most worthy purpose. *At the same time May 1 no longer will be known as either strike day or Communist Day.*” (Italics mine—A. T.)

THE CRISIS OF 1929

Refusing to learn from experience, the reactionary trade union leaders, for nearly a decade after the first World War, had been busy sowing illusions of permanent prosperity under capitalism, instead of organizing the millions of unorganized workers and preparing the masses to meet the disasters with which capitalism was soon to overwhelm them. When the economic crash came at the end of 1929, and the trusts and monopolies tried to put the entire burden of the crisis on the working people, the only protection the workers had was the resort to strikes and mass struggles of the unemployed. As a result of these struggles, in which it was the Communists who played a leading role, the American workers were able to stave off even worse disasters and to enlarge their democratic rights, while registering during the decade of the 1930's, both in the A. F. of L. and C.I.O., the greatest advances in trade union organization in the history of the American working class. The launching of the C.I.O. in 1935 and its rapid organization of the mass production industries constituted a major achievement of historic significance for the entire labor movement and country. As a result of this upsurge of American labor, the conditions were created for an important advance of the Negro people in their struggle for equal rights, thereby strengthening still further the democratic front in the United States.

Shaken by imperialist war and revolution and an unprecedented economic crisis—all within the brief span of a decade and a half—world capitalism had clearly entered a general crisis. The imperialist rivalries which had resulted in the first World War were only intensified by its outcome. Furthermore,

the abolition of capitalism on a sixth of the globe, the inexorable growth of the colonial struggles for independence, and the mounting determination of the workers of the advanced capitalist countries to improve their living standards and maintain and extend their democratic rights only enhanced the general crisis of capitalism. The trusts and monopolists sought to preserve their stranglehold on economic and political life and to stem the inevitable progress of history by resorting to the terrorist dictatorship of fascism. The monopolists in France, England and the United States did all in their power to encourage fascist movements and to promote and finance fascism in defeated Germany and in all other countries where the weakness and disunity of the working class and other progressive factions of the people opened the way for fascist victory. All this signified not only a world-wide effort of monopoly capital to destroy centuries of democratic achievements but a sure road to a new world war.

THE WAR AGAINST FASCISM

From 1933 to 1939 German fascism served as the spearhead of world reaction. Encouraged by Anglo-American imperialism whose aim was to build up Nazi Germany for a war of annihilation against the land of socialism, German fascism, motivated by its own imperialist aims of subjugating the entire globe systematically prepared for the second World War, while the Japanese imperialists joined in the conspiracy for their own ends. By its very nature such a war could only be directed against the national independence of every country of the world. In this situation, it became increasingly evident that the fate

of human progress rested in the hands of the working people in alliance with the farming masses and oppressed colonial peoples everywhere. They alone, by their initiative, their unity and resistance, could rally all the democratic forces and elements of the nation to halt the disastrous advance of reaction inspired by monopoly capital. Throughout the 'thirties, therefore, May Day echoed the call for resistance to fascist aggression and unity of all democratic forces and peoples to stem the advance to a new world slaughter.

World War II demonstrated beyond any further doubt that the working class was the real backbone of the nation. If fascism could come to power and plunge the world into a devastating war because the working class was divided, it could not triumph over a united and embattled working class everywhere spearheading the defense of democracy and progress and rallying the democratic majority of mankind to crush the fascist monster. And in this mortal struggle, the democratic peoples everywhere saw with their own eyes that it was the Soviet Union and the toiling masses of every country who were in the forefront of the historic battle for national independence, democracy and progress.

During the war the working class everywhere observed May Day by staying on the job and producing the weapons for the destruction of the fascist armies. When the war ended in 1945, the first May Day celebrations witnessed the outpouring of millions of toilers, especially in the victorious and liberated lands of Europe, demonstrating their determination to continue the fight to root out forever all remnants of fascism, to achieve once and for all the unity of the working class with all other progressive elements of the population as the sole guarantee that monopoly

capital will never again be able to resort to fascism as a means of perpetuating its rapacious rule, to maintain and extend democracy—the sovereign power of the people, to establish a lasting peace, and keep open the path to a socialist world free from exploitation and oppression.

Struggling for peace and for a happier future for all mankind, the working class of every country salutes on May Day the peoples of the world in the spirit of international solidarity and comradeship.



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